

An Analysis of the Voice of America
and Radio Moscow Broadcast

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Introduction

North American Service of Radio Moscow

During its inception, Radio Moscow's programs were designed for the most part to explain what the revolution had accomplished, how the country was progressing toward communism.(1) Connolly(2) made an analysis of Radio Moscow North American Service programs to derive some understanding about the methods used for the spreading of communism and to gain insight into the ways in counter-persuasion.

Among the themes that emerged were "desire for peace and friendship", "nuclear disarmaments," "imperialism," "external interference of a country's affairs," etc.

The U.S.S.R. aspires to communicate the Soviet phenomenon as she thinks appropriate for the North American listeners. As Radio Moscow correspondent Joe Adamov says:

"Radio Moscow broadcast is ideal in reaching as many people as possible, especially in the United States, to explain our point of view on certain international issues, e.g. the Iranian crisis from the Soviet point of view".(3)

Adamov criticizes that:

"The U.S. national press tended to give one-sided portrayal of Soviet life, that the country is going to the dogs. We try to show how it is, the weak and the good sides. No use hiding it. They will find it sooner or later". (4)

And, despite Soviet distrust on the power of the American public opinion polls,⁵ it is this very mechanism that they are trying to utilize in the hope that by bombarding North American listeners with their brand of propaganda, significant issues would be picked up and advanced through various public forums, especially the Congress of the United States.

They knew how Congress had rejected the Vietnam appropriation bill during the most critical stage, thus enabling the Soviet Union to expand its influence there.

In general, international broadcasting is meant not only for the lay public, but also the administrators and politicians who are involved in policy deliberations and decisions.

Voice of America: The International Broadcasting Service of the United States

The voice of America is an instrumentality of the American government,⁽⁶⁾ conferred with the obligation to mirror life in the U.S. as fully and accurately as possible and also to serve as a channel for the statements and views of the U.S. government.⁽⁷⁾ The VOA presents the official policy of the U.S. on a given matter.⁽⁸⁾ Its programs are designed to expose and combat the propaganda apparatus of the Soviet bloc.⁽⁹⁾

Both the VOA and RM were established to serve their respective governments. Although their functions are similar, but for ideological reasons, the nature of their output and audience response to it differs.

This paper aims to focus on this output and the characteristics of the audience who is the final determinant of the success or failure of the former.

For this study, the RM and VOA broadcasts of February 18, 1985 were used.

The methods used in determining the characteristics of programs offered by the two stations are by analyzing the themes of news, editorials, features, commentaries, etc., and by comparing the reports of events from the VOA with the reports of the same events from RM, wherever appropriate.

Radio Moscow carries about eleven items while the VOA puts out 14 items in its hour-long newscast. From the recent broadcasts, it is found that only the "Crossroads incident"(10) was brought by both stations. However, both have stories on Afghanistan and Nicaragua. The Spain story differs in content: RM's story centered on labor strikes, while VOA's story focus on the country's economic problem and NATO membership.

Relationship between ideology and news, and probable audience reaction

The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are infinitely apart in political ideology and social philosophy. While the U.S. espouses democratic freedom with its attendant benefits such as free speech and the observance of human rights values, the Soviet Union is a very oppressive regime:

"The brutality of persecution has increased recently, especially since Andropov accession to power in November 1982".(11)

According to Mauny (12) the Soviet Communist Party continues to regard Marxism-Leninism as the immovable wave of the future and is convinced of its eventual triumph over all other forms of human society. The belief in this inevitability is attributed to their world image of society as functioning as any other living organism, alive and developing. (13)

To the President of the United States Ronald Reagan, the U.S.S.R. is essentially the same revolutionary, universally, messianic state that was established by the Bolshevik revolution. (14)

In its newscasts, the VOA emphasizes the communist tendency of infiltration into other nations, especially of those economically and politically unstable.

For example, the first two topics in the VOA newscast studied are of this theme:

1. China's infantry and artillery units' incursion into Vietnamese territory;
2. Vietnam poison gas attack on Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand.

These items are strategically placed in the early part of the program to derive the maximum impact upon the target audience. The Western world has been tirelessly exposing the communist motive. It wishes to eradicate the communist myth of human liberation.

It will not be surprising to find the "liberation" type stories in RM news programs. There is one on Nicaragua and one on Afghanistan. The Soviet Union has already gained an ideological footing in those countries. So, both reports are concerned with defending these gains, e.g. criticism on Pakistan for aiding the Mujaheddin in weakening Kabul's security; the rebuke on Reagan for calling Sandinista's foes "our brothers" as well as comparing them with Lafayette Bolivar, and Von Stenber and the American revolutionaries fighting the British in the pre-1776 era.

The RM just treats the Contras as rebels. This, however, is a contradiction. It has been known that the American Revolution is looked upon as a "war of independence"¹⁵ by the Russians, thus reflecting their bias about America.

Obviously, there is some problem of interpretation as to who is the aggressor or the agressees.

The VOA, on the other hand, talks about the dwindling arms supply of the Contras.

Nuclear Disarmaments and the Second World War

Soviet expansionistic tendency through arms might had almost brought it into a collision course with the Western bloc countries if not for the signing of the SALT treaties which began in 1969. (16) Detente or peaceful co-existence was seen as the only practical course to take; even though its basis was no more than an easy consensus in avoiding mutual annihilation. (17)

However, although the fear and tension over an impending holocaust has been relaxed, it does not mean that the Soviet Union has abandoned their struggle against capitalism. On the contrary, its leaders called for the heightening of ideological struggle and pledging anew their support for national liberation movements. (18) Accordingly, the emphasis on military strength, either for defensive or offensive measures, appeared quite frequently in RM newscasts. (19)

Radio Moscow's first feature is an article from the daily Pravda, concerning nuclear disarmament.

It states that:

"the recent Soviet proposal to freeze nuclear weapons has been welcome by more than 100 nations... only the U.S. and her co-allies opposed it... In fact, Washington has been searching for new ways of building up nuclear arms... The Soviet Union will not allow this to happen." (20)

The article appeals the other countries to drastically lower the level of nuclear confrontation by relying on the principles of equality and equal security.

This inherent obsession with self-preservation²¹ has engendered American vigilance in facing the soviet challenge. The U.S. Security Administration was undoubtedly concerned with Soviet designs.

The Soviet people, on the other hand, are resentful if such incursions into Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979) were to be defined as acts of aggression. White(22) points that their conception of the reality world is somewhat distorted. The communist government monopoly on the instruments of communications may have enabled it to persuade the majority of people to think in their terms; that they were sending a liberation force; that they were averting capitalistic attack and preventing the recurrence of the experience they had from the Nazi German invasion during World War II. (23)

This "German aggression" theme appeared twice in the Soviet newscast. According to Smith:

"For most Americans the Second World War is now distant and insignificant abstraction. But to the Russians is could not be more favorable or more revealing. The War for them is a mystic... the ever present-theme of the holocaust, the war as an explanation of the Soviet economic lag behind the West." (24)

Radio Moscow "History Club" recalls the desperation of the German army when they were confronted by deserted farms. This same theme appears in the criticism about U.S. spending of \$100 billion on nuclear weapons' research and comparing it with Nazi experiments of the missile bombs of the "V" series.

The VOA does not touch the nuclear issue. Instead it features the fostering of international relations. For example, Miss Yu Sai Kon's success in getting the Republic of China interested in her television documentary work for the CCTV of Peking, exchange-students involment in international sports; the sub four-minute miler of New Zealand, the world cotton production, and the restoration of George Washington's estates.

The emphasis on history, culture and sports is a way of bridging the gap of knowledge about each other. For VOA, it wants to impress that the U.S. is not a warring nation and that friendship with China, though different in ideologies, is indeed possible.

Radio Moscow totally neglected sports. Only two items concerned the ordinary people, e.g. the visit of three Soviet ladies to the United States, to emphasize the importance of common bonds between peoples. But again this is tied with the nuclear and war issue, thus communicating to us the actual motive of the program instituted by them.

The nature of the VOA program is, therefore, more reflective of life in the U.S. since it portrays the image of friendship and cultural bond among nations. This is important in correcting the misconceptions among Soviet citizens about the U.S.

The Media and the Audience

In a country where the content of newspapers and magazines are closely watched or censored, where program content of radio and television proliferated by ideological elements, and where news is carefully selected to reflect government policy, the people would strive to search for alternative sources. (25)

According to Shipler (26) when the Soviet Union lifted the jamming of the VOA between September 1973 and September 1980, its broadcast became a source of news for millions of Russians including many high officials.

However, our experience and orientations in the free society may tend to exaggerate our outlook about the Soviet citizen. It is said that the younger generation complains bitterly why things had not changed fast enough. But, as Mauny points out, the Russian is patriotic and has a deep and tenacious love of Russia for her own sake. (27)

"The Russian may have nothing good to say about the system, the party, or the government.... but has loyalty to the rodina or motherland is beyond questions" (28).

For instance, when the VOA carried news about the grain sales to the U.S.S.R., it was believed that the Russians generally dismissed this report as propaganda, instead they argued that the Soviet Union was the supplier of wheat grains to needy countries. (29)

In its newscast, the VOA uses the subtle approach when it reveals that "the 1984-1985 was especially bad crop year in the Soviet Union, third straight year, this year in ten years with record low." Probably the Soviet listener would react strongly if this were not a feature story about the general trend in cotton production in the various countries of the world. The VOA mentions that:

"China is the largest cotton producer, producing one-third of the global total this year, more than the combined total of the biggest and producer U.S. and the Soviet Union". (30)

Radio Moscow, on the other hand, emphasizes on the heavy industrial sector; oil and coal which the Soviet Union has in abundance. It talks of its achievement in building the Trans-Siberian pipeline that had inspired Pierre Trudeau, former Prime Minister of Canada, when he visited the country a few years ago. They compared it with the Trans-Alaskan pipeline. It measures 1400 km long, but took only eleven months to complete compared to the Trans-Alaskan pipeline which took three years to build. This is about 57 times faster in construction time. (31)

This emphasis on heavy industries has its drawback for the Soviet Union. It means lesser attention has been given to the production of finished goods for the consumer such as foodstuffs and clothing. (32)

The Soviet citizen is not unaware of his country's lack of the basic necessities:

"When I meet a friend who has just returned from abroad he is wearing a new suit that he got over there. Any other countries there is a lot of everything - cars, clothes, food, while here there is a shortage of this and shortage of that. You are told over and over again that things are going well here, that we will catch up and overtake the capitalist." (33)

Despite what we heard from the media about the daring exploits of the outspoken Soviet dissidents like Andrei Sakharov who is still in the Soviet Union and Arkady Shevchenko who has defected to the U.S., the general feeling is that "the interlligentsia are afraid to protest(34) because of the fear of exile to desolate and cold Siberia and the fear of being sent to mental hospitals and given mind-destroying drugs, etc. This probably what had happened to Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuri Daniel in 1966.

Comparison of VOA Copy and RM Copy

The differences between the VOA and RM broadcasts are evident. The former provides variety, quality and quantity. It informs the listeners about life at home. The order given to various items reflects the general attitude of the U.S. government regarding current issues affecting its domestic and foreign policies:

Communist aggression in IndoChina
Human rights violations in South Africa
Troubles in the Middle-East
Freedom of foreign correspondents
(Jeremy Levin)
N.A.T.O.
U.S.-British relations
Freedom of the press (Westmoreland vs
CBS)

The Special English segment is popular in many parts of the world which should be emulated by other international stations.³⁵ The program is about the effort of Pamela Ann Cunningham of South Carolina in restoring a part of American heritage, the Washington estates at Mount Vernon, as a national monument.

Radio Moscow newscast not only reflects the belief system operating in the Soviet Union but also the general attitude as professed by the Soviet government, e.g. the citing of a lengthy Pravda article about the nuclear arms build-up. The following are some of the main themes in RM news:

- Nuclear arms race
- Nicaragua's defense against rebels
- Germany' claim to Alsace Lorraine
- Capitalist exploitation in Bhopal
- Labor unrest in Spain
- Heavy industrial development
- Election of politbureau member to Supreme Council

In terms of format, there is little difference between foreign and national news in Radio Moscow. For example, the story about the election of a politbureau member to the Supreme Soviet Federation is tied to the story about his past efforts combating U.S. psychological warfare.

Unlike the VOA, the background information of RM stories is carefully tainted with ideological elements.

The use of quoted interviews in RM news or features is quite unsatisfactory since most of these interviewees are poor in intonation and delivery style. The simultaneous translations do not help much.

Radio Moscow broadcast is polluted by static noises. The Soviet Union must have realized this since its broadcaster like Joe Adamov visited the U.S. several times in the past. However, what steps they had taken to remedy the poor receptive quality of the RM is unknown.

This is one area where the governments concerned have to work out. Perhaps, in the spirit of detente the exchange of programs might overcome part of the problem. For the U.S., the unpopularity of shortwave radio is indeed a setback; but we do not expect all Americans to change a habit; the intelligentsia could pave the way for its common usage.

International broadcasting is not an asset to any government if no one cares to pay any attention to it.

Reference

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- 3 Joe Adomov's videotaped interview with Prof. Donald R. Browne, Speech Department, the University of Minnesota.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Gibert, Steven. Soviet Images of America. New York: Crane, Russak & Co., 1978, p. 68.
- 6 Inkeles, Alex. Social Change in Soviet Russia. Cambridge. Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 347.
- 7 Browne, p. 109.
- 8 Pirsein, Robert W. The Voice of America. An History of the International Broadcasting Activities of the United States Government 1940-1962, New York: Arno Press, 1979, p. 427.
- 9 Ibid, p. 402

10 This is the report about rioting by South African Blacks who were against forcible removal from Crossroads squatter camp to the new township Khayelitsha, 30 km. North of Cape Town.

"Repeatedly police fired teargas and shot back at screaming mob". Five Blacks were killed and 50 others injured. (VOA newscast, Feb 18).

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14 Simes, p. 115.

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- 26 Shipler, p. 248
- 27 Mauny, p. 48
- 28 Shipler, p. 283
- 29 Ibid, p. 298
- 30 VOA newscast, February 18
- 31 RM broadcast, February 18
- 32 Parker, p. 90
- 33 Shulman, Colette (ed.). We the Russians. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971, pp. 200 - 209.
- 34 Ibid, p. 246
- 35 Donald R. Browne